

The East Timor Issue Today

An Interview with Jim Dunn, by Brendan C'Dwyer

The Indonesian occupation of East Timor has meant demonstrably only massive trauma and suffering for Australia's tiny near neighbour. Nevertheless, according to a recent statement by the Australian Foreign Minister, efforts to achieve the right of self-determination for the East Timorese are "pointless . . . (and) incapable of practical implementation for the real benefit of the Timorese people". The following interview shows that a significant number of governments, human rights organisations, concerned individuals and, most importantly, the Timorese themselves, believe just the contrary — that far from being a "sterile political debate" it is precisely the exercise of their right to self-determination which holds the key to the happiness and peace of the Timorese people.

Jim Dunn was Australia's consul in East Timor, 1962-1964. He re-visited the territory in 1975 and has written and spoken extensively on the subject.

Jim Dunn, what is the situation in East Timor today?

Well of course not much information is coming into the Australian press about the situation right now and the Timorese are obviously facing greater difficulty in getting information out. But I've had some information from letters received by Timorese in Australia and from Portugal, where there seems to be more activity and interest in the subject at this time. And from these it seems the military struggle is continuing and, although I've been rather sceptical and guarded in the past towards reports about the military resistance, it seems there's a fairly extensive amount of fighting in the eastern part of the territory between say Venilale and Tutuala in that central mountain area. There are also persistent reports that fighting is continuing elsewhere. One report suggests there's fighting going on all over East Timor but I find this hard to accept even allowing for Indonesian inefficiency and the bitter-

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ness and hostility of the Timorese towards the Indonesians.

What do you know about the nature of the Indonesian administration and army control?

The overall military command, the Nusatenggara Command, is conducted from Bali, under Brigadier-General Kalbuadi. Timor itself is divided into some 13 military districts. I don't know how many troops are there but there has been one hard report of two battalions near the town of Laga on the north-east coast, a place I know fairly well. To have two battalions in that one particular area which does not have much merit otherwise — it's away from the main centres — suggests there are considerable military establishments around the countryside. There have also been reports in the last six months of continuing air activity, but exactly where it's taking place and whether there's bombing or machine-gunning etc. we don't know.

But these are indications that there is still a good deal of resistance.

Yes. It is also interesting to note that there was an article in the Age a few days ago from the Observer correspondent in Jakarta who said there are about 300 armed resisters left. I don't know where the author got the information but what is interesting about it is that



that was the figure Mario Carrascalao gave the US Congressional Sub-Committee in March 1977 and we well know there was very intense fighting after that. This kind of figure is very difficult to assess but maybe there is a hard core of 300 and perhaps beyond that there could be several thousand Timorese hiding away, very bitter, but nevertheless committed enough and armed well enough to create an environment of insecurity in many parts of the territory.

We have had disturbing reports only recently from Amnesty International that a number of the Fretilin leadership have been executed.

Yes. I'm awaiting that report. It's a statement rather than a report and it refers to a letter written to President Suharto by Amnesty. The statement says it seems 22 Fretilin leaders were executed after they had surrendered on the terms of the amnesty announced by President Suharto.

When was that?

In 1977 — they surrendered and were executed some time later. The statement also refers to a number of prison camps. It's not the first one this year. There've been several reports of prison camps. Henry Kamm of the *New York Times* referred to four prison camps and as we know last year Father do Rego, the Portuguese priest who left Timor in 1979, referred to a number of prison camps. I think the Amnesty statement speaks of one in particular at Comarco which is just to the west of Dili. They also speak of several hundred Timorese detained for political reasons.

So most of the information you are relying on is coming from relatives of people in Timor, through letters sent to them in Portugal or Australia.

Yes, most comes from relatives via perhaps foreigners who are fortunate enough to make an occasional visit and take a letter out with them. I don't know how often this is happening but certainly some are coming out that way and of course Indonesian church sources are another source. I must make the point that although the International Red Cross and US Catholic Relief Services are

operating in East Timor, the actual foreign presence is not only tiny but in some cases quite occasional. I understand that one American CRS official is allowed make occasional visits but there is no non-Indonesian permanent CRS presence there. Even in the case of ICRC only one foreign official, a doctor, has been there all along, but only one — the rest stationed there are Indonesians. One limitation in this situation is that the Indonesian Red Cross is controlled by the army. So not much information is coming out that way and in any case the ICRC is very careful not to become a source of information about political matters.

You've followed the situation very closely in the past few years and the situation has been one of immense dislocation of the people. What would you think the situation is now, what would the standard of living be, what sort of problems would the people be facing?

The way I see it from reports coming out is that the Indonesians, partly for security reasons and partly because of the dislocation, have herded the bulk of the Timorese into a number of resettlement centres based on the 'strategic hamlet' concept. In these centres, again for security reasons, they're not really free to leave or come and go. And of course it's convenient from a distribution of medical and food supplies point of view to have them in these centres — though, incidentally, these supplies seem to be still far from adequate. What this has done to the people is that, based on the few pieces of information that have come out, it has absolutely destroyed the

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economy, even made it worse than it was before simply because people have been taken away from their traditional farming areas. Whereas before they were farming in the interior and under the Fretilin organisation, if we can believe people like Father do Rego, they really had some structure going and farming would indeed have been fairly effective in providing a basic food supply if they hadn't been under constant pressure from Indonesian military forces. I think the actual food production in East Timor remains at an all-time low simply because the resettlement centres don't provide the essential community village basis for agriculture. It has just disrupted it. The other impression one gains is that the population is largely terribly demoralised as one would expect — so many people have been killed, the occupying Indonesian authorities still tend to be rough and brutal, though not nearly as bad as they were, but there's no way that the Timorese feel other than prisoners in their own country. I think in these circumstances the actual food producing economy has fallen to an all-time low. The money-producing crops like coffee appear to have been taken over, at least indirectly, by the Indonesian military. There are a couple of areas where attempts are being made to stimulate agriculture such as in the Maliana district but once again it seems this development is largely under Indonesian control. The Timorese don't see it as being of particular benefit to them other than to produce some food.

It seems then there is a very real subjection of the people by the Indonesian authorities who are very much in control.

One gets that impression even though there have been attempts by some Indonesians to open it up and to win the hearts and minds of the Timorese. The fact is, however, they've tended to concentrate on the town areas and on simply supplying food and medicine to the Timorese. It's very interesting the way this whole situation has been presented internationally. Though in a sense it has naturally gone that way, in many cases it has been deliberately channelled in such a way that the Timor problem, and I think many officials in the US and Australia have said this, is now only a matter of medical relief and food and this deliberately ignores the very important psychological factors about which nobody wants to talk and about which there has been no serious investigation.

What do you mean by psychological factors?

How the Timorese feel about their situation, how they feel about the Indonesians, what they see about their future, and of course what is being done to really rehabilitate the economy of East Timor and to establish a workable political structure.

However, the situation seems not to be forgotten if one is to judge by the newspaper reporting in the United States at the moment.

I am quite impressed with this reporting in the US on East Timor. It has been much greater than in Australia and in fact many of the reports in the Australian press have come from American sources. American interest has been stimulated by a number of factors. One is the reports coming out, particularly the Peter Rodgers report, but also other reports of the grim famine situation in East Timor last year between August and November, that subsequently led to some Congressional interest in the problem. In January 1980 there was a visit to Timor by a US Delegation of the sub-committee on International Organisations — practically no attention was given to this visit in Australia, yet the delegation on its return did make some quite positive recommendations. It didn't go into

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the politics of it but it spoke of the obvious need for greater humanitarian relief and, what is really important, of the need for a greater foreign presence on the ground to keep an eye on the distribution of relief from foreign sources and to assess the needs. The other factor has been the Afghanistan issue which has been a major issue in the US. It has made some people look at what happened in East Timor — almost in some ways at the extreme of the spectrum. Here is an economically weak and strategically unimportant country which has been raped, as they would see it, in a manner similar to Afghanistan, and where the loss of life in per capita terms is more serious. But even more seriously to the Americans information has been coming out, and remember that Jack Anderson ran three

or four articles last year, showing US complicity with Indonesia's move to seize East Timor. And this does worry a lot of people in the US, who are concerned that the Administration is overdoing the Afghanistan issue in stark contrast to the role it played in East Timor when it not only did nothing to stop Indonesia going in or to urge withdrawal but really — and this is where there has been continuity between the Ford and Carter administrations — has actually discouraged other countries from taking an active interest in what has happened in East Timor and has persistently downplayed the seriousness of the humanitarian situation and of course has suggested that the Timorese have died because of the civil war and not because of the Indonesian invasion and such like.

What kind of impact is this heightened interest in the media having on Congress?

Some congressmen have had a long-standing concern — Donald Fraser, for example, though he is no longer in Congress. Tom Harkin and a number of others have been looking at Indonesia's human rights record and of course East Timor came into focus in that context. Many of these people feel the US has been very inconsistent in the human rights area. It was after all President Carter who made human rights a central component of US foreign policy. But as they see it, it is just not good enough to be constantly hammering the Russians and ignoring such serious abuses as East Timor. There have been a couple of Congressional Hearings at which people like Professor Ben Anderson of Cornell University — a leading American specialist on Indonesian affairs, very strongly criticised the Indonesians over East Timor. There have been a number of Hearings at which other people have given testimony. The International League of Human Rights a very important organisation — not only in the US but internationally — only recently took up the East Timor affair and it has now made three important contributions, one in the UN General Assembly, and two in the Congressional Hearings drawing attention to the serious situation in East Timor. As a result of these contributions and the *New York Times* reports of Henry Kamm and James Markham (the *New York Times* man in Portugal) Congressional interest certainly heightened in late February and March. In March an important event took place which received to my knowledge no publicity in this country. Some 18 American Congressmen sent a petition to President Carter urging the President to review US policy towards Indonesia over East Timor. These Congressmen also circulated a very strong resolution — and if you bear in mind that the Americans have tacitly accepted the de facto situation in East Timor for some time — this actually called for the Indonesians to permit an act of free self-determination in East Timor. I think it was a major step. The resolution also called for more relief. Very specifically this shows how the Australian press has weakened on the subject because to my knowledge this wasn't reported. The resolution drew attention to the fact that the Indonesians were obstructing the emigration of those Timorese who wanted to leave the country. I don't know where that Resolution has gone but I'm fairly certain at least 50 Congressmen have signed it.

That is in really striking contrast to the level of activity in Australia.

It is indeed. There was a statement by the Minister representing the Foreign Minister in the Senate, Senator Carrick, on April 23 which set down very clearly that Australia saw no advantage in any further discussion of

the humanitarian situation in East Timor. He referred to it as a sterile debate. But certainly in the US a number of organisations have raised it and where the American administration is vulnerable is that it has been pressing very strongly the situation in the Soviet Union and in particular the Soviet military intervention in Afghanistan. It is very difficult not to draw a parallel between that intervention and the intervention of the Indonesians in East Timor. Equally the reports of the atrocities and brutalities in East Timor are at least as soundly based as those coming out of Afghanistan which are almost eagerly welcomed.

Is there any concern being expressed in Third World countries, the non-aligned bloc for example?

The African countries still strongly support the Timorese and you may recall another resolution was passed at the UN last November — with 62 votes for and strong support from Africa and Latin America as well. Where there is an interesting possibility of shift as I see it is in the Russian position because of her involvement in Afghanistan and because of the very careful Soviet policy to try and keep in with the Indonesians. Last year something very curious occurred in the UN. Although the Russians voted for the resolution in support of East Timor's self-determination, Eastern European countries did not — they abstained. It might well be that the Soviet Union because of its intervention in Afghanistan will see some advantage in shifting its position but of course this could cause other shifts in other directions. China has also weakened its support for Fretilin as such but of course that is something that might well be distinct from supporting the right of self-determination for East Timor.

Another interesting change has taken place in Portugal. Although there was a swing last year to a conservative administration the new government appears to have committed itself to greater activity on East Timor and earlier this year a four-man commission was set up to co-ordinate efforts on East Timor between the two centres of government in Portugal, the Revolutionary Council and the Government itself. Recently there was a suggestion that the Portuguese might be moving towards recognising East Timor as part of Indonesia. This was very strongly denied by one of the leading members of the Council who said there was no question of Portugal even contemplating accepting East Timor as part of Indonesia at this stage. But they are planning to have some sort of contacts which is understandable and obviously necessary from a humanitarian point of view. Nevertheless Portugal could be more active and I think Portugal is a key country — its a much more respected country in the world now than it was before 1974 — and Portugal's stand will have quite a strong effect in Latin America, in African countries and in Western Europe.

Do you think any of this activity is likely to have any impact on Indonesian policy? Is there any likelihood of change within Indonesia?

I have this fear that external pressure will not have much effect unless the US and the Netherlands have a drastic change of heart and pressure comes from the major contributors to the aid consortium (the Inter-Governmental Group on Indonesia). Unfortunately Afghanistan has taken some of the attention away from East Timor, although in some Western countries in a curious way it has brought East Timor back because to keep the balance they want to look at one. Probably

the hope is a pretty forlorn one for the Timorese unless something happens within Indonesia itself and that's something we can't predict. There have been several shifts recently. Not a great deal is known about political thinking in key areas of the military leadership in Jakarta. It is possible there could be change. But what it would mean for East Timor it's hard to say. While the armed struggle continues there will be some attention. For myself I have

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always had an anxiety about this, that is if the armed struggle finishes then the world will forget about it and even in Australia, particularly within the Government, there is a tendency to look at the question of self-determination in those very crude terms. It's a bit like saying that once the Germans had actually suppressed all resistance in the Netherlands they could have called it part of Greater Germany. If there's no struggle, it does not mean that the human rights situation has changed. But in practice there tends to be a focus on military resistance.

Well at this very late stage what should Australian Government policy be? What kind of action should Australia take?

I'd still like to see Australia become more involved in actions relating to the humanitarian situation and not just the question of providing food and medicine. It's quite obvious that as it is a neighbouring territory the question of whether the Timorese have been able to exercise their right to self-determination is a basically important one to us. The fact still remains that our sincerity, our integrity in these sorts of issues, on which we've taken a strong stand in the United Nations for many years under Labor and Liberal Governments, is really tested in a situation like that of East Timor. So far of course our record has been a pretty grim one. Might I add there has been international activity in some other areas and one area of interest is the Interparliamentary Union. East Timor has been discussed there during the past 12 months on at least two occasions and there have been two resolutions reaffirming the right to self-determination of the Timorese, in a sense reflecting the spirit of the UN General Assembly resolutions. It's interesting to note that at the last one the Soviet Delegation abstained as far as I can make out, which maybe indicates the change I was talking about earlier.

This debate then will continue in the parliaments of the world?

Yes, this is a reminder that it's in the Parliaments that this sort of basic issue of human rights will continue to be discussed for a long time. Certainly in the Australian Parliament, there's no doubt in my mind that the East Timor issue will continue to be raised vigorously from time to time by representatives on both sides of the House.